

## The Reconstruction of a Samoan Village: Quest for the spatial narration of the mythological origin and the social structure of Poutasi

Hennings, Werner

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P.O. Box: 10 01 31  
33501 Bielefeld  
Germany

Phone: +49 521 106-6944  
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Werner Hennings

**The Reconstruction of a Samoan Village:  
Quest for the spatial narration of the mythological origin and the  
social structure of Poutasi**

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# **The Reconstruction of a Samoan village: Quest for the spatial narration of the mythological origin and the social structure of Poutasi**

*Werner Hennings*

## **Abstract**

In 2009 the traditional village centre of Poutasi was destroyed by a tsunami and a majority of the inhabitants since then have abandoned the old settlement. Only a few of the former residents repaired or reconstructed their houses at the traditional site at and around the village square; most of them decided to adopt a settlement development which increasingly took into account a persistent trend: to meet the requirements of modern mobility and to live at or near the road. As a result of this shift the village has lost its traditional public space – the village square – but at the same time it has not found a similar place at the road. Although most central institutions of the village and the district today are located at the main road within a small distance from each other, there is no public square where people can meet, communicate and celebrate their festivities as they were used to doing at the traditional square. The loss of the traditional village centre is not only a loss of sociability, but also a loss of the social identity of the village: The traditional village square and its surrounding buildings once reflected the mythological origin and the social structure of the village as described by the Samoan mythology and documented in the faalupega, the archives of the Samoan society. The loss of the traditional village centre of Poutasi means the loss of an important part of the Samoan spatial archives including sociality.

## **Zusammenfassung**

Im Jahr 2009 wurde das traditionelle Dorfzentrum von Poutasi an der Südküste der samoanischen Insel Upolu von einem Tsunami zerstört und von der Mehrzahl der Anwohner verlassen. Nur wenige der früheren Bewohner des Ortes haben ihre Häuser repariert oder wieder an der traditionellen Stelle am bzw. um den Dorfplatz aufgebaut, die meisten haben sich entschlossen einen schon seit langem anhaltenden Trend der Siedlungsentwicklung Rechnung zu tragen, den Erfordernissen der modernen Mobilität zu folgen und an oder in der Nähe der Straße zu wohnen. In der Folge dieser Siedlungsverschiebung hat das Dorf seinen traditionellen öffentlichen Raum, den Dorfplatz, verloren, ohne im Gegenzug einen ähnlichen Ort an der Straße gewonnen zu haben. Obwohl sich nun die meisten zentralen Einrichtungen des Dorfes und des Distrikts innerhalb einer kurzen Distanz an der Straße häufen, gibt es keinen öffentlichen Raum mehr, wo sich die Dorfbewohner ungestört vom Verkehr treffen, mit einander kommunizieren und Feste feiern können wie sie dies zuvor am traditionellen Dorfplatz gewohnt waren. Der Verlust des traditionellen Dorfzentrums ist nicht nur ein Verlust von Geselligkeit, sondern bedeutet für das Dorf zugleich den Verlust von gesellschaftlicher Identität: Der alte Dorfplatz mit den ihn umgebenden Gebäuden spiegelte einst die mythologische Herkunft und die Gesellschaftsstruktur des Dorfes wider, so wie sie gemäß der samoanischen Mythologie in der faalupega, dem Archiv der samoanischen Herkunft und Gesellschaft, dokumentiert sind. Der Verlust des traditionellen Dorfzentrums von Poutasi bedeutet deshalb auch den Verlust eines wichtigen Teils des räumlichen Archivs von Samoa.

## **1. Introduction**

At the end of September, 2009, a tsunami destroyed almost all villages on the south coast of the island Upolu (Samoa). According to eye-witnesses the village of Poutasi in the district of Falealili, situated in a central position of the coast, was one of the most affected places. The wave extended approximately 200 m inland, overrunning all buildings as far as the main coastal road, damaging also most of the hospital and school buildings. In the old village

nucleus the house of the village council, the houses of the families of the three high chiefs, the church buildings of both the Congregational and the Catholic church, the residences of the two pastors and the houses of some of the high-ranking talking chiefs and a handful houses of some kinsmen of the high chiefs either have been severely hit, completely destroyed or even been swept away to the sea. The following picture taken from a helicopter (Fig. 1) shows the village nucleus a few days before and one day after the tsunami and a picture taken only a couple of hours after the wave (Fig. 2) provide evidence of the disaster.



Figure 1: Aerial pictures of Poutasi before and after the tsunami (source: MNRE)



Figure 2: Poutasi a few hours after the tsunami (source: MNRE)

The present study surveys the spatial patterns in the course of the reconstruction of the village and the central themes and ideas which have served the village people as marks of orientation in the process of reconstruction. In order to achieve its aims the study proceeds along three methodical steps of research: (a) the procurement and comparison of aerial pictures showing the spatial structure of the village before and after the tsunami, (b) a detailed mapping of the current village structure and its comparison with previous mappings and (c) interviews with all heads of those families whose houses were affected by the tsunami, concerning eventual transformation of subjectivities after such a natural phenomenon, their

aims and central ideas for the reconstruction of their homes, including the question of the symbolic values of the traditional place and its implications concerning social esteem, prestige and political power.

The thesis argues that the Poutasi as it was before the tsunami architecturally and spatially has been marked as a place of a specific social identity and a spatial mirror of the social structure. Even so the majority of the village people did not rebuild their homes on the original place at the sea but shifted inland to a place securely above the sea level at the main road in the same time means the loss of the traditional village centre. One of the leading question of this project was to find out whether the present generations still are aware of the meaning of the spatial narration of their village and whether they consider it to be important enough to suppress their fears concerning a recurrent tsunami and rebuild the settlement according to its tradition. The thesis maintains that this trend is not only a loss of sociability, but also a loss of the social identity of the village: The traditional village square and its surrounding buildings once reflected the mythological origin and the social structure of the village as described by the Samoan mythology and documented in the faalupega, the archives of the Samoan society. The loss of the traditional village centre of Poutasi means the loss of an important part of the Samoan spatial archives including sociality.

The first chapter of the paper opens with some observations on the spatial structure of the village before and after the tsunami, continues with the observation of local and general trends in architecture and settlement structures in Samoa and then focuses on a reflection of some social consequences of this spatial development. The second chapter moves from observation to explanation presenting first an analysis of the spatial village structure as a symbol and a message of social prestige and identity, then opening up for a discussion on spatial structures and “ideal public spheres” in the sense of Habermas before theoretically reflecting on the observed spatial trends in terms of privacy, publicity and social identity.

## **2. Observations**

### **2.1 Poutasi after the tsunami – depopulation of the village nucleus**

A map drawn of the village centre during the field work conducted in 2006 shows the spatial structure of Poutasi at the beginning of the century (Fig. 3). Located on the sandy bank of a peninsula (respectively an island) between the lagoon on the south side and a river/swamp on the north side, the village presented a line of settlements, i.e. a series of houses for the various families stretched along the lagoon. In mids of them in the village nucleus we find the buildings of the main institutions of the village: the house of the village council (fono matai) at the village square (malae) and the buildings of the two churches, congregational and catholic, all in all eleven buildings. The village primary school and the district college are

located north of the village square and on the other side of the river, i.e. beyond the traditional village nucleus, while the district hospital is located west of the school.

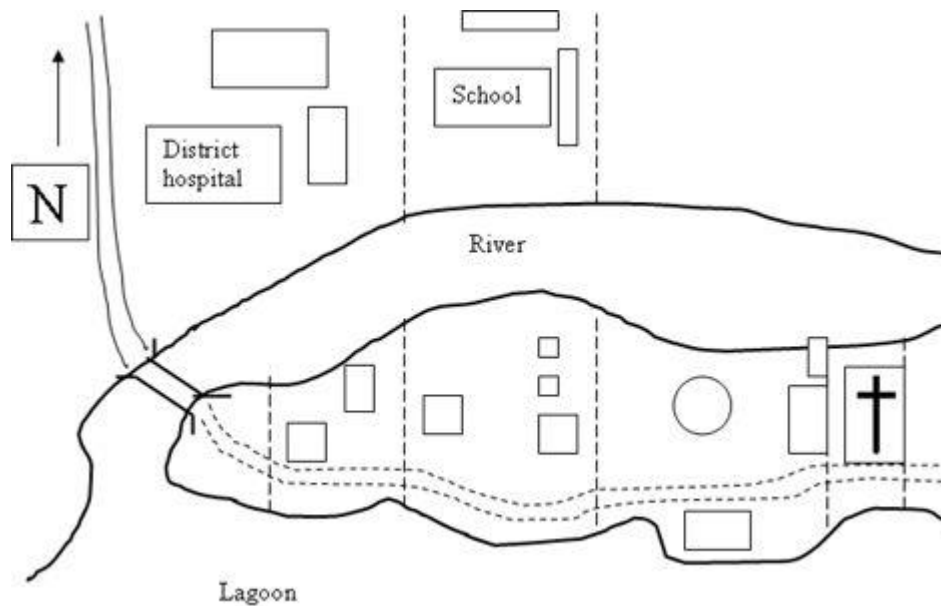


Figure 3: Village nucleus of Poutasi: Stock of buildings (2006)  
(source: own draft according to mapping in 2006)

In July 2015, six years after the tsunami, the village centre presented a totally different picture (Fig. 4). Of the once 10 buildings on both sides of the malae or village square only four houses in this part of the village have been repaired or reconstructed since the tsunami: apart from the church building and the village council building (1) which almost completely withstood the force of the wave. One of the reconstructed houses belongs to the Tuatagaloa family, children of the late previous alii sao, first ranking chief of the district (2), and the other one to the present holder of this high chief title (3). Every one of these four buildings was and now is of brick or concrete. All the other houses or their remains have been levelled off and been abandoned by their owners and residents, even if the buildings (though partly damaged) as a whole were strong enough to resist the tsunami, f.e the stone-walls of the community hall of the Congregational Church.

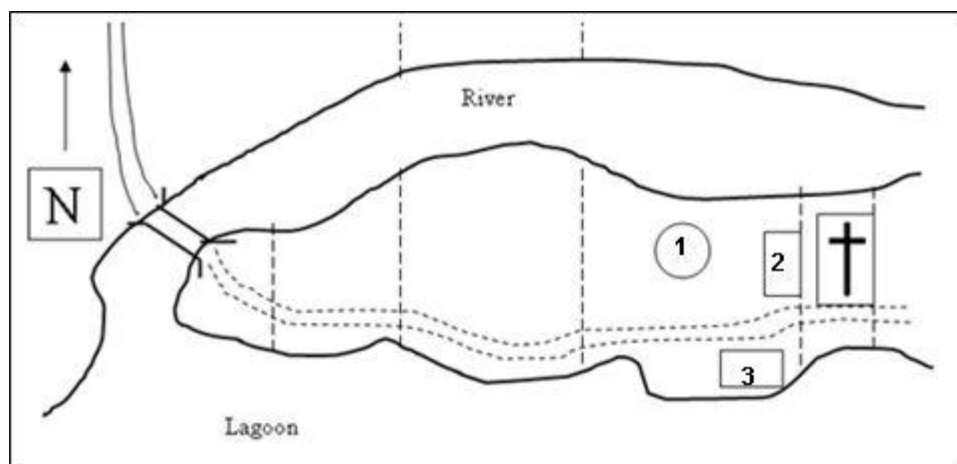


Figure 4: Village nucleus of Poutasi: Stock of buildings (2015)  
(source: own draft according to mapping in 2015)

Further on to the east end of the coastal part of the village and beyond the Congregational Church once there stood all in all thirteen buildings, the Catholic Church and the catholic community hall and to both sides of the church and the small square in front of it the houses of another eleven families (Fig. 5).

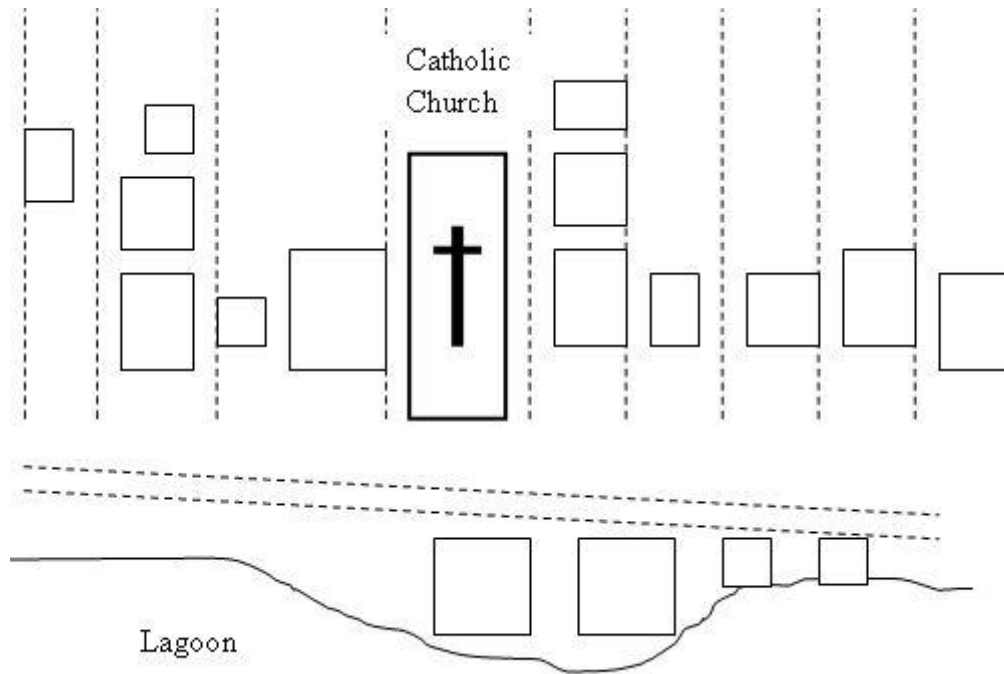


Figure 5: East end of the coastal part of Poutasi (2006)  
(source: own draft according to mapping in 2006)

Today only seven of them have been repaired or reconstructed, very similar to what happened in the central part of the village. Apart from the Catholic Church building, the catholic community hall and the house of the catholic minister (all buildings in stone and concrete) we find today only two residential houses (3 and 5), one of which has been repaired but not occupied, and another one (4) on its way to reconstruction (Fig. 6).

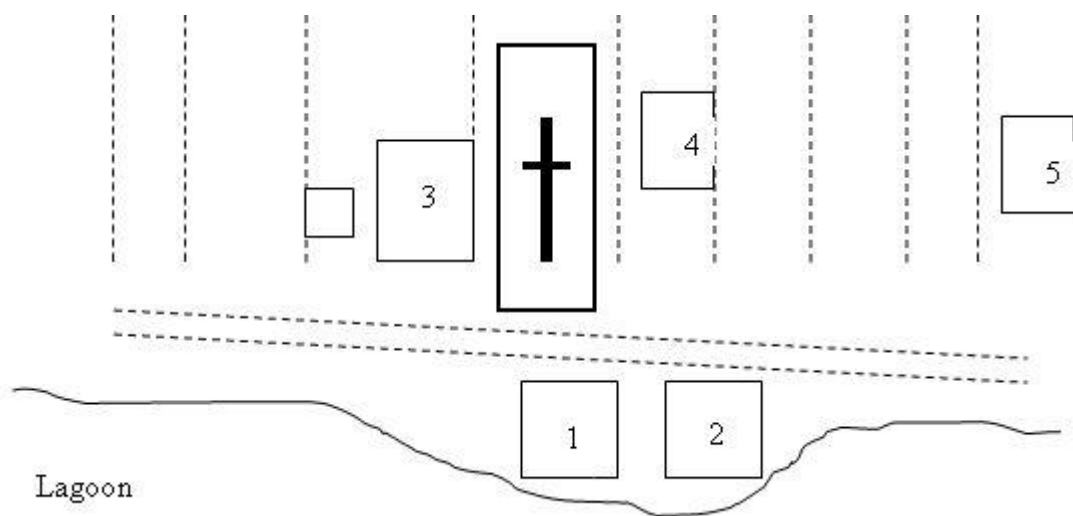


Figure 6: East end of the coastal part of Poutasi: Stock of buildings (2015)  
(own draft according to mapping in 2015)

## **2.2 Reasons for leaving the place**

All of the fifteen families which once lived in their houses at the lagoon before the tsunami have been interviewed concerning losses, decisions, process and reasons for decisions, eventual changes in settlement patterns after the tsunami, previous and present locations and costs of reconstruction, financing and aspects of prestige (mamalu) and power (pule). Included are interviews with the three present holders of the high chief titles and the daughter of the late first ranking chief of the village and the district who occupies the representative house of the Tuatagaloa family at the village square between the village council and the congregational church.

The shock all inhabitants experienced during this natural disaster was deep and long lasting. Six persons lost their lives, many others were injured, some of them so severely that they had to stay in hospital for weeks and even months. While a few of the residents were not on the spot when the wave occurred, most were present, some of whom succeeded in escaping in time by running up the 200 m to the main coastal road which is a few meters above sea level and proved to be safe. Yet many others didn't make it in time and were overrun by the wave. The survivors succeeded in holding on to a tree or a strong branch until the water had drawn back. The experience of the tsunami led the majority of the village people to a noticeable spatial change: Many abandoned the traditional site of residence at the lagoon and moved to a safer place located on a ground higher up and further up inland.

Twelve buildings were totally destroyed, three others partly damaged. All furniture, kitchen equipment and clothing were swept away and lost forever. The value annihilated hardly can be estimated in monetary terms but the costs for only reconstructing homes and buildings amount to a sum of about 1 800 000 WS \$ (630 000 €). This is a substantial sum for a village economy which is largely still based on subsistence incomes. In 2006 the monetarisation factor (defined as the share constituted by monetary income in relation to the total income of a village community from both subsistence and the market sectors) of the village came up to less than 50% while the per capita monetary income per year in 2006 was amounted to roughly 1 550 WS \$, equivalent to 550 € (Hennings 2011: 106). The financial aspects of the village reconstruction also reveal that solidary systems and social networks are as intact as 10 years ago (Hennings 2011: 111f):

- all families were helped by the government with a sum sufficient to meet the basic requirements of a house to live in,
- 80 % of the families received assistance by their nuclear or extended family, both in financial form and in labour/ material,
- 40 % of the families received substantial financial, material and working aid by church relief organizations like the catholic Caritas and



- in the cases of the two church ministers the congregational and the catholic community contributed almost for the total of the reconstruction costs.

### 2.3 The new spatial structure of the village – a trend to the road

After having found provisional and temporary accommodation and board in the houses of other members of their extended families for some weeks or months, in the end the heads of the families had to decide how and where to re-establish their home. In most cases the decision was taken commonly by a family council, in some cases by the head of the family on his own. The majority of the families and their heads in the end decided for security avoiding another exposure to an eventual tsunami. In only six cases the decision was to repair or to reconstruct the buildings on the traditional ground, in eleven cases the decision was for a new location. Three families decided to do both, to rebuild on the old place *and* to build a new house (new houses) somewhere else, and one family decided to leave the village. The result of these decisions can be viewed in Figure 7.

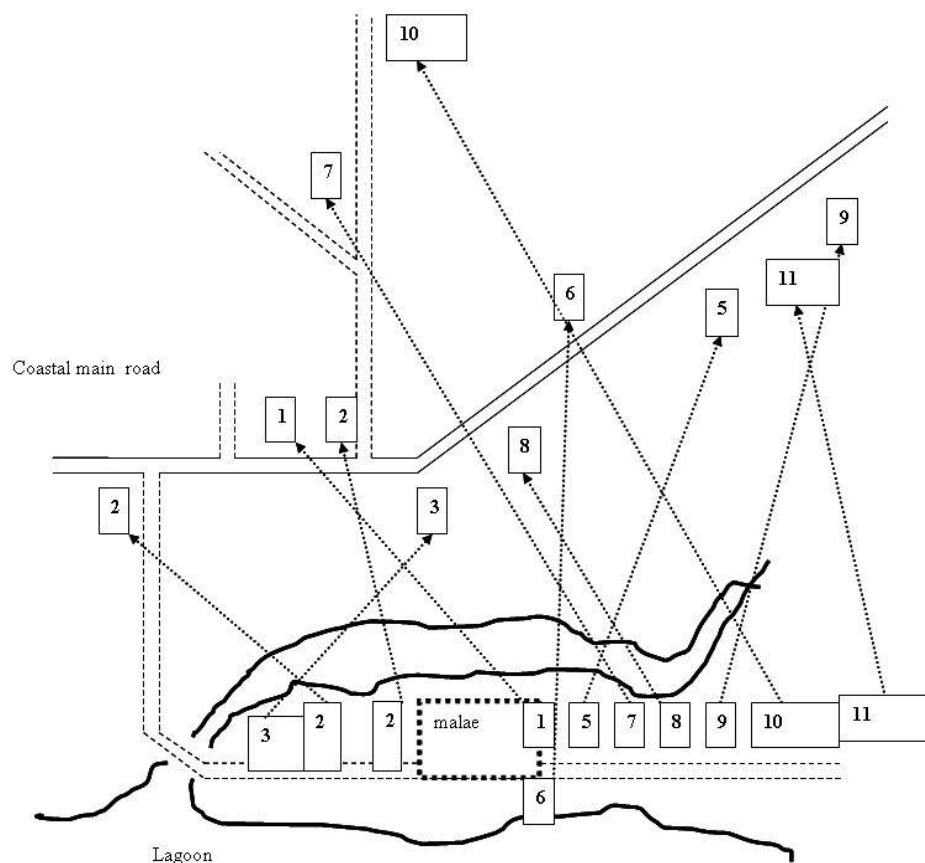


Figure 7: Shift of houses from the coast line to the road after the tsunami  
(own draft according to interviews and mapping 2015)

Considering the dangers of another possible tsunami the twelve families once living on the sea side of the village now occupy a home in a more secure place, i.e. on a ground further up inland and situated clearly above sea level. This is the part of the village which was not affected by the wave. Ten of them live now along the main coastal road, the other two even

further inland along the access road to the plantations. The decision to settle at the main coastal road is not new, but rather the confirmation of a long existing trend. In the course of the last 50 years the settlement patterns of the village have been totally reversed. In 1965 only 25 % of the village settlements were located at the main road and the large majority of 75 % was situated at the seaside. In 2015 we find 85 % of the village settlements at the road and only a small minority of 15 % still remaining at the sea (Table 1).

Year	Sea side	Main Road
1965	25	8
1989	25	21
2006	21	28
2015	7	38

Table 1: Development of the settlement patterns in Poutasi  
(sources: Lockwood 1971: 125 and own data)

The development of the village settlements towards the main road clearly reflects the socio-economic development of the Samoan society as a whole and particularly the Poutasi development in the course of the last 50 years. It is a development from a more or less subsistence-based economy with small scale commodity production on its way to a market economy. Whereas in Poutasi between 1989 and 2006 the monetary income per capita increased by 28 %, in the same period the respective per capita income from subsistence product declined by 8 %. The monetarisation factor (defined as the share constituted by monetary income in relation to the total income of a village community from both the subsistence and the market sectors) increased in this period of time from 63,6 to 70,9 (Hennings 2011: 106).

There is no statistical data for the development of the last ten years. Yet there is visible evidence, based on architecture, equipment of the households with modern furniture and kitchen appliances and the development of motorization, that the monetarisation of the society as a whole and of the village society has continued. More and more village people are engaged in market economy. Many have a paid labour job, either in the village but even more in other parts of the island, especially in the urban area of Apia. Busses run more frequently and the number of cars owned by village people has increased considerably. Whereas in 1982 during my first field trip I observed only two private cars in Poutasi, in 2015 I registered 32 of them (not all in a roadworthy condition) and in addition two taxis. 32 cars for 56 households, that means that almost 60 % of the village households are provided with a car. And the taxis of the village are quite busy, both in the village and beyond it in the coastal districts of the southern part of the island.

The trend to settle at the main road goes along with another trend of modernity (Tab. 2). 50 years ago 90 % of the houses of Poutasi clearly were constructed according to traditional Samoan architecture, i.e. circle or oval ground plan and open, i.e. without walls to divide inside and outside and using home materials grown in the plantations. Whereas only 10 % of

the houses had a so-called European shape, i.e. rectangular or quadratic, in most cases constructed with materials imported from overseas. In 2015 this relation proved to be the other way round: 88 % of the houses had a “European” ground plan and only 12 % still favoured the traditional Samoan shape. Whereas in 1965 only 5 % of the houses in Poutasi were closed, i.e. with walls to separate inside from outside, the closed type of houses in 2015 already represented the majority, i.e. 51 %. The development of the village architecture thus reflects a clear trend to modernity and privacy.

Year	1965	1989	2006	2015
Big Samoan house	20	1	-	-
Samoan house	43	50	34	11
Open European house (wood)	2	35	34	38
Open European house (stone)			10	2
Closed European house (wood)	4	16	10	13
Closed European house (stone)			22	33

Table 2: Architecture and choice of construction materials in Poutasi  
(source: Lockwood 1971: 125 and own data)

## 2.4 Village settlements at the road – a general trend in Samoa

Like Poutasi many other villages of Upolu were struck and severely damaged by the tsunami. In most cases the fear of a repetition of such a misfortune led a majority of people to look for a safer place to rebuild their home. Such safer places in general exist further inland on grounds clearly above sea level. In the south-eastern part of the island entirely new settlement patterns have been developed. Above of the old villages and on top of the cliff new hamlets emerged from the forest and the plantations and roads were built in order to connect these settlements with the existing infrastructure. Good examples for this type of resettlement after the tsunami are the villages Lepa (Fig. 8) and Lalomanu (Fig. 9). Before the tsunami both villages were located at the foot of the cliff and the uplands remained uninhabited, whereas in 2015 many plots at the shore once inhabited now remain abandoned and instead many other houses have emerged in the uplands.



Figure 8: Settlement patterns in the village of Lepa before and after the tsunami  
(source: MNRE and google earth)

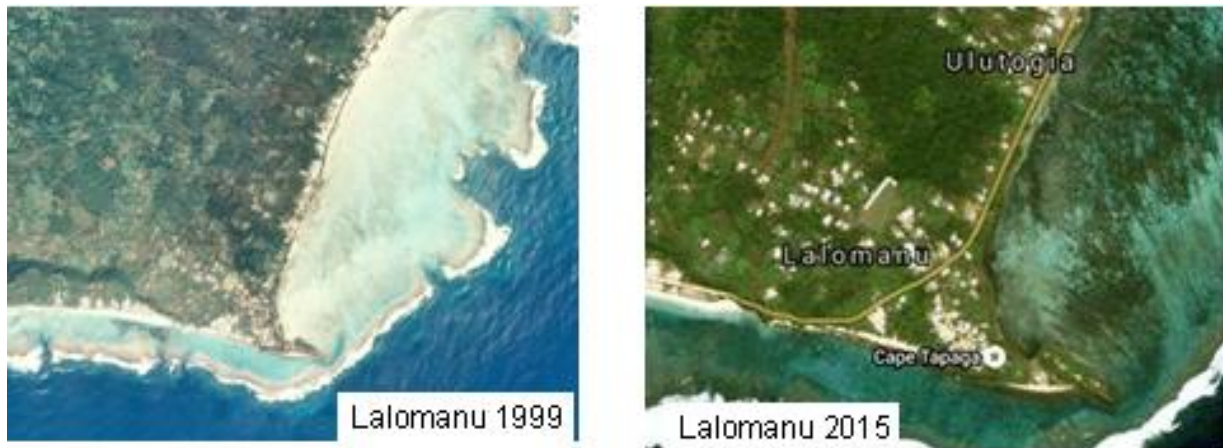


Figure 9: Lalomanu before and after the tsunami  
(source: MNRE and google earth)

Siumu-village is situated in the middle part of the south coast. This is the appropriate location to connect the south coast of Upolu with the capital Apia at the north coast, and the cross-country road was built in the 1960s. As a result of this development Siumu-village which so far had its settlements exclusively at the sea from now on developed buildings at the main coastal road and its junction with the road across the mountain ridge to Apia. In the case of Siumu the destructions of the tsunami did not have similar effects as in the villages at the southeast end of the island because the seaside village is situated some meters above sea level and the inhabitants didn't feel as threatened as their compatriots elsewhere (Fig. 10).

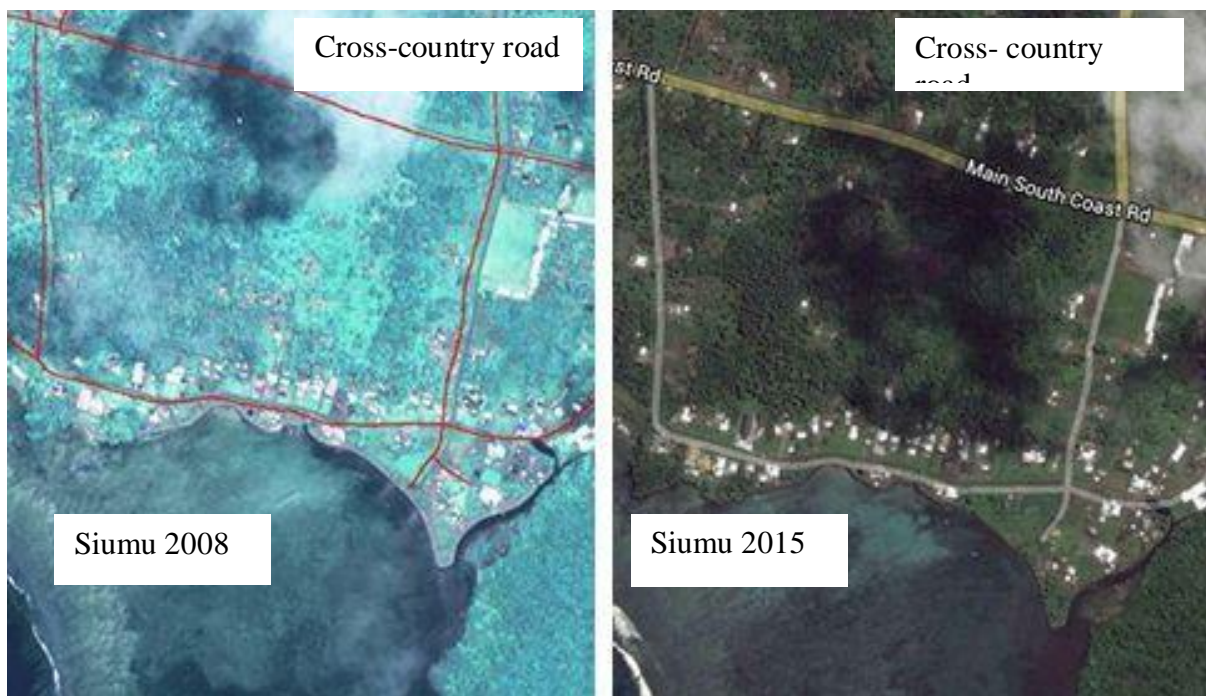


Figure 10: Siumu before and after the tsunami  
(source: MNRE and google earth)

A very special example is the village of Salamumu in the western part of the south coast. In contrast to most other Samoan villages Salamumu is a relatively new settlement, founded at



the beginning of the twentieth century after the volcanic eruptions on the great island of Samoa, Savaii. The lava covered entire villages and the people who founded Salamumu at the south coast of Upolu were given new land to set up their new homes. They did very well and built a village which for a long time could be regarded as a masterpiece of traditional Samoan architecture and which proudly was presented to foreign visitors and tourists (Fig. 11).

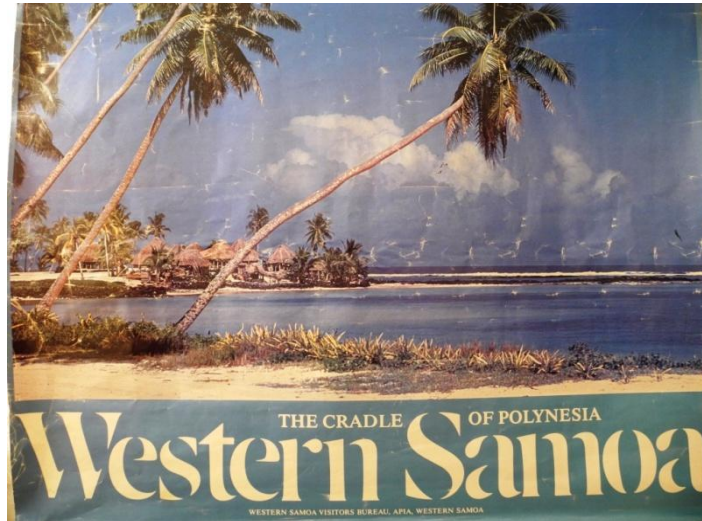


Figure 11: Salamumu 1982, advertising poster of the Samoan Visitors Bureau

Almost exactly 100 years after the volcanic destruction of their old village in Savaii the new one was eradicated, this time by the sea. By 2015, six years after the tsunami, the village has not been rebuilt; people have moved further inland where Salamumu uta (Salamumu inland) had been long since developed - as in many other cases a settlement at the coastal road.

50 years ago, and long before that, practically all Samoan villages were situated at the sea. Then the desire for increasing mobility led to the construction of roads and the establishment of bus routes, which were subsequently expanded more and more, so that in the end individual traffic tempted people to shift their homes from the traditional location at the sea further inland to the main road which connects the villages with the urban area of Apia and other villages.

## **2.5 Social consequences – a village without nucleus and centre**

Before the tsunami the village square (malae) of Poutasi in front of the village council (fono matai) and between the residential houses of the three high chiefs undoubtedly constituted the centre of the settlement. All the more so since other social institutions were located next to it: the Congregational and the Catholic Churches and their community halls as well as the residences of the two ministers. Except for the village council, the two church buildings, the catholic community hall and two chiefs' residences (which are not permanently occupied because their owners predominantly work and live in other places) the traditional village centre now is uninhabited. The visitor who walks along the access road to old village nucleus today is witness of an empty and in a way dead place, populated and alive only on the

occasion of a chief assembly (usually once a week for half a day) and on the occasion of church services (usually twice a week Sunday morning and afternoon).

On the other hand at the coastal main road and especially in its central part between the former village nucleus and the plantations we can observe a greater presence and frequency of people in the public space. Yet there is no evidence of a new village centre despite the fact that many if not most main institutions today are located on this section of the road (cf.: Fig. 12). Here we can find the new building of the district hospital (1) and the new village community hall (3) with the sports ground between them, the new district college (2), the buildings of the newly established “Poutasi Development Trust” (PDT) with a village pre-school, a new library, a new Art Centre (5, 6 and 7), an organic farm and the administrative building of the PDT with the office its founder, sponsor and director: the present holder of the title of the first ranking chief of the village and the district (8 and 9). Complementing this accumulation of institutions we find other important buildings of public interest: the district police station (10), the main village store (11), the new community hall of the Congregational Church and the house of its minister (4 and 14). Opposite to the house of minister are the new residences of the second ranking chief (on village and district level) and next to this place the new home of the daughter of the late first ranking chief (12 and 13).

The new buildings on this section of the main coastal road form a cluster in the sense of centrality, but this is not sufficient to form a new settlement centre or nucleus comparable to the traditional one at the lagoon. The new cluster of institutions and buildings at the road lacks one important condition to be a real centre: The buildings are lined up along a busy road, there is no possibility for the people to take a rest without being disturbed by the traffic, to meet and interact as they could do at the malae. The constantly flowing supralocal traffic forces them to move on more or less steadily. To form a real centre the village lacks in particular a public place in the sense of a square which clearly is defined by buildings skirting the place and thus providing an aura of seclusion and unity. The sports field (15) between the district hospital and the new art centre is not a square in this sense.

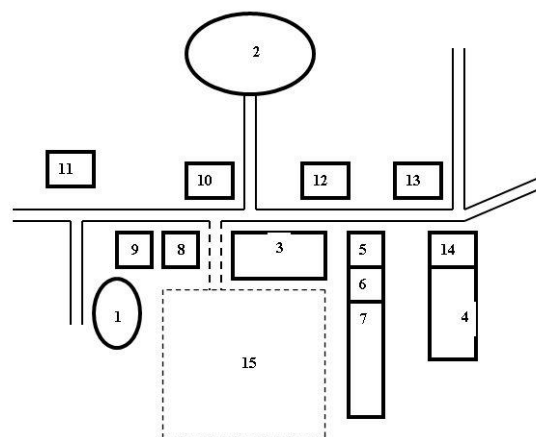


Figure 12: Poutasi 2015 – location of central institutions  
(own draft according to mapping 2015)

### 3. From observation to explanation

Based on the theories of Löw (2001) and Eco (1972) the present study assumes that spaces and places can be understood as texts written or created by individuals, social groups and societies in their historical contexts and as such also can be read or visually perceived. To put the thesis in concrete terms the Poutasi as it was before the tsunami architecturally and spatially has been marked as a place of a specific social identity and a spatial mirror of the social structure. Executing certain “spacings” (Löw 2001) on and around of the public square the leading clans of the village and district have formulated very distinct messages that in their symbolic effects contributed to the reproduction of social power and supremacy by legitimising and stabilizing their prestige. The focus of the spatial interest and creativity of the social elite aims to present the place as a stage of power which by means of symbolic effects and an atmosphere of amazement and fascination helps to establish a specific social identity and thereby to reproduce and stabilize the existing and prevailing social relations of power and supremacy (cf.: Hennings 2010 and Hennings et al. 2016).

#### 3.1 Poutasi - ethnographical research and analysis of the spatial structure

Krämer in his fundamental ethnography of the Samoan islands mentions Poutasi in the context of a place Saga, a place which according to his observations is a composition of the settlements of Matautu, Vaovai, Poutasi, Saleilua and Iliili. He contends that each of these settlements appears so great that with good reason they could be regarded as village unities on their own (Krämer, 1902: 287).

In this context most interesting however seems to be the text of the “faalupega”. Originally it was an orally handed down (and since Krämer a written) compilation of the family trees of all Samoan high chief titles and their mythological genesis accompanied by ceremonial phrases of welcome. These are recited even today at the beginning of every assembly of the village council by one of the untitled men when serving the cava bowl to honour the holders of the highest ranking chiefs and their mythological descent. The respective text of the faalupega says for Saga:

Tulouga alala gafa  
tulouga alo o Fanene  
susu mai lau susuga  
o le matua 'o Fanene  
afio mai lau afioga a  
Tuatagaloa  
'o le to'o savili  
'o le sa'o fetala 'i  
afio mai lau afioga a  
Meleisea  
'o le sa'otamaita'i  
tulouga a lau afioga a Leilua  
ma au tamatane Touli

Greetings to the present ancestor  
greetings to the sons of Fanene,  
Greetings your honour  
our elder Fanene  
Greetings your honour  
Tuatagaloa,  
who steers the boat against the wind  
and is the leading speaker.  
Greetings your honour  
Meleisea  
leader of the honoured group.  
Greetings your highness Leilua  
and your sons Touli

ma Asuao ma Tapu  
 ma Leali'ie'e  
 tulouga a oe Lufilufi  
 ma lou ali'i  
 'o le Tuisamoa

and Asuao and Tapu  
 and Leali'ie'e  
 Greetings to you Lufilufi  
 and your chief  
 Tuisamoa

(Source: Krämer 1902: 290f)

Reading the faalupega we thus learn that Poutasi not only is part of the place called Saga but also a kind of capital of the district Falealili because this is the seat of the two highest ranking titles in Falealili, Tuatagaloa and Meleisea, according to mythology both of divine descent.

As stated by the testimony of the elders of the village and especially of the orators in the mythology the highest Samoan god Tagaloalagi married a young lady called Muliovailele. Their son Pili in his behaviour not always did as he should and therefore his parents let him drop down from heaven. He fell onto the Manua islands in the eastern part of the Samoan archipelago. There he settled down and got married to a daughter of the Samoan king Tuimanua. Thereby Pili attained kingly title. Later he married a daughter of the Tuiaana, king of the kingdom of Aana on the island of Upolu. His second wife gave birth to four sons. One of his sons was Tolufale, ancestor of Fanene who as we already know by the recited passage of the faalupega is the father of Tuatagaloa and Meleisea, the two highest ranking chiefs of Poutasi and Falealili.

The passage of the faalupega thus reflects the social order of the village and this is also reflected by the settings (spacings) of spatial structure of the village nucleus according to a map drawn in 1965 (Fig. 13).

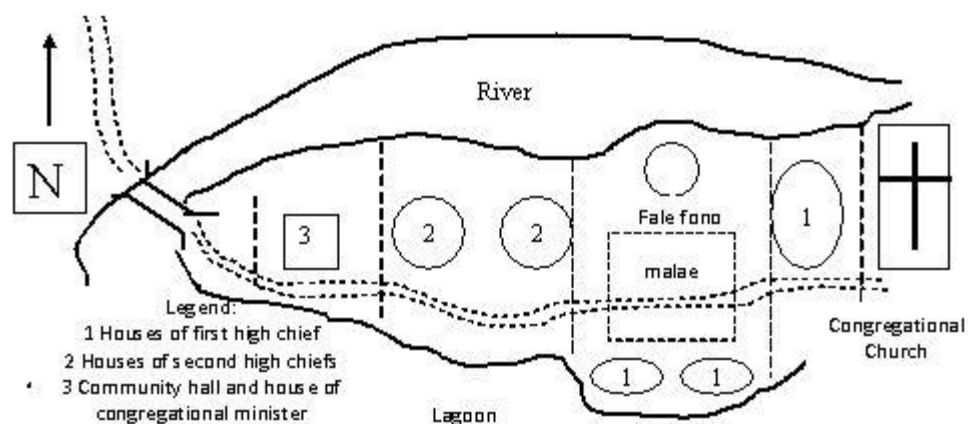


Figure 13: Poutasi – spatial structure as by 1965  
 (own draft on the basis of Lockwood 1971: 125)

The traditional centre of the village is situated on the sandy bank of a peninsula well protected against possible enemies by a river and a swamp which separate the site from the mainland. At first glance the settlement which stretches from west to east in a row of houses seems unspectacular, but a closer look accompanied by some information concerning functions and occupants of the houses shows a well designed village.



The inner nucleus is formed by the village square (malae), the central public place of the village. This is a site of all important public events of the village. Here is the place to celebrate local festivities like the presentation of traditional dancing and singing, to ceremonially celebrate the weddings of the daughters of the high chiefs, to play the most popular Samoan version of cricket (kilikiti) and to receive and welcome high ranking foreign visitors. In these cases the square is the place for public celebrations of welcome with speeches of the talking chiefs or orators (tulafale) and the exchange of gifts such as fine mats (ietoga) and roasted pigs.

The north end of the square is the location of the village council (fale fonofale) where the chiefs of the village, i.e. the elected heads of the families (matai), come together to hold their meetings. South of the square and located on a small piece of reclaimed area (land which artificially has been reclaimed from the sea by throwing huge lava rocks into the lagoon) is the site of two smaller Samoan houses meant as guesthouses of the first ranking high chief of the village.

Lining up like a chain, a row of houses extends to both sides of the square. East of the square lies the house of the Tuatagaloa family, the head of which is the holder of the highest chiefly title. West of the square lie the houses of the Meleisea family, the two heads of which are the holders of the second highest chiefly titles. Beyond the house of the Tuatagaloa family, i.e. east of it, is the location of the Congregational Church. West of the houses of the Meleisea family is the place of the community hall of the Congregational Church and the residence of the congregational minister. Again to both sides of these buildings described above are the houses of the orators (tulafale) and the kinsmen (usu alii) of the high chiefs. All in all a settlement which has been designed in a very symmetrical order, at the same time reflecting the social structure and hierarchy of the village. The message of this spatial narration tells of the social significance and the prestige of the families and their titles. It is a message about the social consensus concerning social rank and balance.

### **3.2 The traditional village square of Poutasi – model of an “ideal public sphere”?**

Habermas bases his model of an “ideal public sphere” on three conditions:

- free access to the place for every member of the community (openness)
- free exchange of arguments (discursivity) so that in the end
- the best argument may legitimize the acceptance and execution of a decision (legitimization).

It may well be that Habermas' definition of the public sphere is not very well suited to meet the requirements of a public square in Samoa: At the time when he outlined his model of an ideal public sphere he thought of the conditions in a Vienna coffee-house, at that time ideal

conditions for developing a free public opinion in a bourgeois society; a background that might not seem to be suitable for the Samoan circumstances.

Therefore it may be more appropriate to include another concept of the public sphere initially formulated by Simmel (1908). In his idea of the public Simmel focuses on the model of communities open for a limited number of persons opposed to those communities open for everybody. A lodge, for example, is not to be regarded as private but as part of a group, i.e. another kind of public sphere, clearly distinct and separated from the rest of the public. Simmel emphasizes that the membership in a public sphere in the sense of a lodge implies two effects of one condition because the participation in and the attendance at the lodge on the one hand mean inclusion, but on the other hand exclusion for all others. Simmel's model of a public sphere based on the idea of a secret society seems more suitable to describe and explain the public of a small and limited Samoan community demarcating and separating the public sphere and the public space of this village community from the surrounding and rival villages.

In fact the village square of Poutasi suits both theoretical approaches to the public sphere and a public space. Although the square usually is not the place for social or political discussions or debates, Habermas' model all the same time meets the three conditions of his concept. Everybody is entitled to (1) enter the square, (2) listen to the exchange of arguments brought forward by the chiefs i.e. heads of the families (i.e. his own one's too) so that (3) in the end the decisions taken by the members of the council, i.e. the chiefs and heads of the families, are publicly accepted and legitimized.

On the other hand the village square appears appropriate for Simmel's concept of a public sphere restricted to a kind of a club such as a lodge. Being limited in the number of its members and focussed on specific local topics it allows the inclusion of all members of this community and at the same time the exclusion of all the other surrounding and competing village communities.

### **3.3 The relocation to the road is a move to privacy and the loss of public space**

As already indicated in chapter 1.5 the resettlement of the major part of the houses at the main coastal road ended in the loss of a real village centre, a square like the one at the lagoon in front of the village council. Today a cluster of central institutions of the district and the village exists (cf. Fig. 12), but this neither meets the concepts of the public sphere brought forward by Habermas and Simmel nor does it fit the definition of a public space and square in the sense that it may be – spatially and structurally speaking – a possible frame for human action.

A well-known definition of a square is based on three distinct factors: on the relation between the forms of the surrounding buildings; on their uniformity or their variety and on their

absolute dimensions and their relative proportions in relation to width and length of the open area (Zucker 1959: 3). These three factors enumerated by Zucker may be complemented by a fourth one, i.e. that it would be desirable that a square is free of road traffic in order to allow people to come together, meet and communicate. The possibility of meeting is vital for every community and society. In order to activate this possibility the community needs the public space, a place to meet in reality and not only virtually or occasionally passing by while walking at the margins of the road.

The public space in the sense of a meeting place involves more than a cluster of social functions, instead it is the place of social contact, communication and social relations; it is the place of belonging to a community and the place for constructing a shared community. Thus community as Das (2007: 9) argues is not something “given or primordial [...]”. Rather, community is constituted through agreements”. Establishing community is a long and extended social effort that, however, in contrast to common understanding does not necessarily imply harmony or stability. On the contrary community is a fragile construct that can be thrown apart by external forces as well as internal disagreements or refusals. To give rise to a sense of community spatial structure seems to be essential. A community, which lacks such a public space, is in danger of social fragmentation. A community without a public space in the long run not only loses the sense for the social but also the possibility to regenerate and to reinvent itself as a collective. The public space of a community without a place for meetings, contacts and communication loses its sense of being a public space. It becomes bare and empty (Quarch 2016:2). With a view to the social conditions of the “ideal public sphere” the cluster of central institutions at the main road neither is consistent with the model of Habermas nor with that of Simmel; the disappearance of a public square in Poutasi at the same time means the loss of the public sphere.

The imminent danger of losing social connections by neglecting the requirements for a public space in Poutasi after the tsunami goes along with settlement patterns which increasingly tend toward residential houses built in the “European” way, i.e. outer walls separate the interior from the outside and inner walls separate individuals from others inside (cf. chapter 1.3, Table 2). The traditional Samoan house is open. It is a building on posts which carry a roof and which has no separating walls, neither to the outside nor inside. Physically this kind of architecture is most suitable in a tropical climate like in Samoa because it allows the regularly blowing trade winds to ventilate the house and thus preventing the overheating of the interior. Socially the trend to closed houses means a development which emphasises privacy and protects the occupants from the curiosity of others, but it is also possible to formulate it the other way round: privacy-enhanced houses protected by walls prevent people from establishing contacts and entering into social relations. The loss of the public space and

the trend to privacy can be seen as two sides of the same coin, both are steps away from Samoan tradition towards global modernity and eventual social fragmentation.

### **3.4 The loss of the public space – price to pay for progress?**

As we have seen the move of the majority of the villagers to resettle not at the traditional place but more inland to the main coastal road is due to two effects: the fear to be a victim of another natural disaster on the one hand and to take part in the modernisation of the Samoan society on the other hand. Both strategies have a common basis, i.e. to avoid by this settlement scheme vulnerability, precarity, poverty and social exclusion.

As Anna Tsing argues „[p]recarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others. Unpredictable encounters transform us; we cannot control, even of ourselves. Unable to rely on a stable structure of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our others. We can't rely on the status quo, everything is in flux; including our ability to survive.” (Tsing 2015:20).

The concept of precarity is closely linked with social development in post-industrial capitalist societies, especially with labour market deregulation, it also includes links with so-called natural disasters: Flood disasters and perishing pacific islands i.e. are due to climatic change caused by the profit-mongering of a capitalistic production still based on the (over-)use of carbondioxide emitting industries. Natural disasters like a tsunami however are not related to man-made catastrophes because they are the result of geo-tectonic movements a couple of kilometres under the surface of the earth: In the course of the continental drift tectonic plates collide at so-called subductive zones and thereby cause tensions which then discharge all of a sudden and at non-predictable times: earth quakes and sea-quakes. The latter tend to provoke tsunamis, huge waves which threaten surrounding coastal areas. Although not man-made this kind of disaster nevertheless can be a cause of precarity in terms that it invokes a fear of indeterminacy: We never know when such phenomenon occur.

Indeterminacy thus can be a threat to human existence, in the modern world we try to control our life by following the paths of modernity: democracy, economic growth and science, in short by modernisation and progress. “Progress is a forward march, drawing other kinds of time into its rhythms. Without that driving beat, we might notice other temporal patterns... Progress still controls us even in tales of ruination. Yet the modern human conceit is not the only plan for making worlds: we are surrounded by many plan-making projects, human and not human” (Tsing 2015: 21).

The problem is that progress is not synonymous with general and all-round benefit, progress often means a loss, too. By choosing progress and security villagers leaving their original places at the village square in the same time may have lost their centre of public life and social identity. Realizing this dilemma it might be advisable to change perspective and

paradigme: Instead of permanently looking ahead occasionally it could be wise to look around (Tsing: 22).

The spatial structures of Poutasi before and after the tsunami perfectly reflect this idea. “Looking ahead” (progress) symbolically can be imagined by streets, geometrically expressed by lines, i.e. a figure which leads from a place (a) to a place (b). “Looking around” (standstill) however symbolically can be imagined by squares, geometrically expressed by circles, ovals, triangles, quadrants or rectangles. Streets and lines stand for speed and acceleration (no time) whereas squares stand for slowing down and rest - time to pause and stay, to take notice and care of others.

### **3.5 The generations of today – still aware of the sense of the place?**

To the foreign visitor Poutasi does not reveal its atmospheric qualities and symbolic effects at first glance, but only after a closer look at the local mythology and social structure. Most certainly the message of the spacings underlying the spatial order of the village nucleus has been common social ground to all village people, but the leading question of this project was to find out whether the present generations still are aware of the meaning of the spatial narration of their village and whether they consider it to be important enough to suppress their fears concerning a recurrent tsunami and rebuild the settlement according to its tradition.

The decisions taken by the families and their heads provide a first indication that the majority (12) of them no longer is aware of the social qualities of the place because most of them resettled somewhere else. Four of the seven families rebuilding their house at the old place nevertheless have in addition a new house at the road where they predominantly live. Of the remaining three families who now own only the residence at the seaside there are two without any other choice because they have no other ground to build their house on. In case of urgent need, the last family may have the alternative to move to the new house of a sister next to the plantations.

In the interviews taken only three families proved to have a clearly defined “sense of the place” (Feld/ Basso 1996), saying that for them it had been out of the question to rebuild the house at the old place. They are aware of the magic of the place and for them it is a question of prestige and tradition to show presence at the village square, the village council and in the immediate neighbourhood of their churches. Two family sites stem from the Tuatagaloa clan, one is the current holder of this paramount chief title and the other one is the daughter of the late previous title holder. The third family is part of the Tumanuvao title, the holder of which is one of the most important orators in the village council. The traditional site for the Tumanuvao family is the place immediately next to the Catholic Church and east of it (Fig. 4 and 13, houses 1 and Fig 6, house 4).

Some of the family heads remained pensive when at the end of the interview they were confronted with the narrative aspects of the traditional village centre, the magic of the place and the role their old place of residence might play in terms of prestige, social influence and power in village politics. At this point of the discussion the two heads of the second ranking clan (Meleisea) declared themselves quite aware of the symbolic and social value of the site and were open to re-considering the question and trying to find a solution in the context of considerable financial aid by the extended family.

The majority of the villagers however show little concern about symbolic effects and atmospheric qualities but are interested primarily in safety and second in land tenure, i.e. to ensure that the property rights in the place where once the residence of the family was do not get lost if the ground no longer is guaranteed by using it. In most cases the family heads have a solution in mind which both saves their financial resources and gives a possibility to other members of the extended family who dispose of more money because they live overseas, but at the same time may plan to build a second home at the place of origin – the traditional site at the lagoon could be the appropriate spot.

#### **Excursus: malae and fale in Poutasi – a look at geometric forms**

Already at first glance the design of the traditional Samoan architecture appears to the observer as an image of perfect harmony. Today there are only a few remains of an architecture which only fifty years ago was normal for Samoan villages (cf.: Fig. 2). More than 60 % of the houses in Poutasi were fale o’o (ordinary living house) and almost 30 % were either fale tele (representative round house) or fale afolau (representative long house, cf.: fig. 14 and 15).



Figure 14: fale tele and fale afolau in Aleipata, Upolu (1996, own picture)



Figure 15: fale o'o in Aleipata (1996, own picture)

Looking at the shapes and the ground plan of this square and its surrounding buildings (Fig. 16) the observer immediately is taken by three perceptions: firstly by the regularity of forms, secondly by the geometric shape of the forms and thirdly by the symmetry and proportionality of the spatial structure which these forms hold in relation to the central square and in relation to each other. Having in mind the geometry of ancient and historical European architecture and famous architectures of other parts of the world, especially architectural ground plans of places in Asia and South America, one cannot avoid thinking that the basic forms of traditional Samoan architecture follow the same ideas of shaping, design and structure, thus making part of a universal architectural language of form.

In the ancient world the architectural and spatial leitmotiv can be characterized by the rule “*ordo, pondo et mensura, artem sine scientia nihil est*” (structure, weight and measure; there is no art without science). Science in these times has to be understood as mathematics and this motto goes back to experiments of Pythagoras who according to a legend after accidentally listening to the sound of certain tones coming from a blacksmith’s workshop experienced feelings of well-being. The systematic experiments which he then carried out led to the antique school of thought which held that, just as the proportions we perceive in sounds produce harmonies and give pleasure to the ear, we have similar feelings of happiness whenever our eyes fall upon spatial structures created on the basis of the same proportions (Giorgi 1525, Palladio 1560, Staab 2010, Zarlino 1573; cf. also Hennings et al. 2016).

The relationship between the mathematical aspect of a proportion and its musical aspect can be demonstrated by a device which looks like a musical instrument made of an oblong sound box with a string stretched lengthwise along it. With the help of a crosspiece this string can be divided up into mathematically exact sections between its two extreme ends (1 and 0), i.e. proportions. If, for example, starting from the left to the right we shorten the string to three quarters of its total length we obtain a sound which is a fourth higher than the unison or



prime; if we shorten the string to half of its total length we obtain a sound which is an octave higher than the prim (Fig. 16).

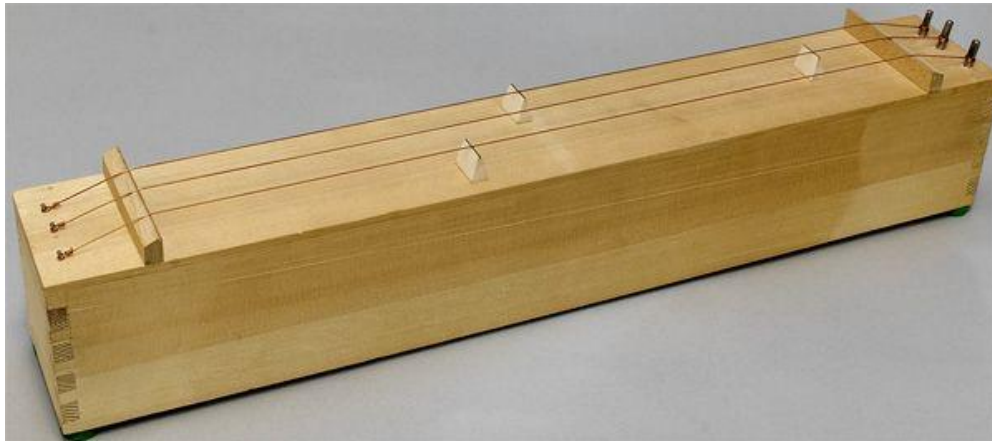


Figure 16: Monochord and its proportions (source: Deutsches Museum)

The ensemble of the village square and its surrounding buildings is formed by five different geometric figures: the square and the rectangle, the circle and the oval, not to forget the point, all basic forms of the architectural theory of classical antiquity and its textbooks (Vitruv) as well as their followers in the renaissance and baroque (Alberti, Palladio, Serlio).

The geometric measures for a fale tele are 3 in height and 4 in length, i.e. a proportion of 3:4 and those for a fale afolau are 1 in height and 2 in length, i.e. a proportion of 1:2 (cf.: The Samoan fale 1992); we will come back to the architectural significance of these measures in the context of the geometric forms of the village square in Poutasi.

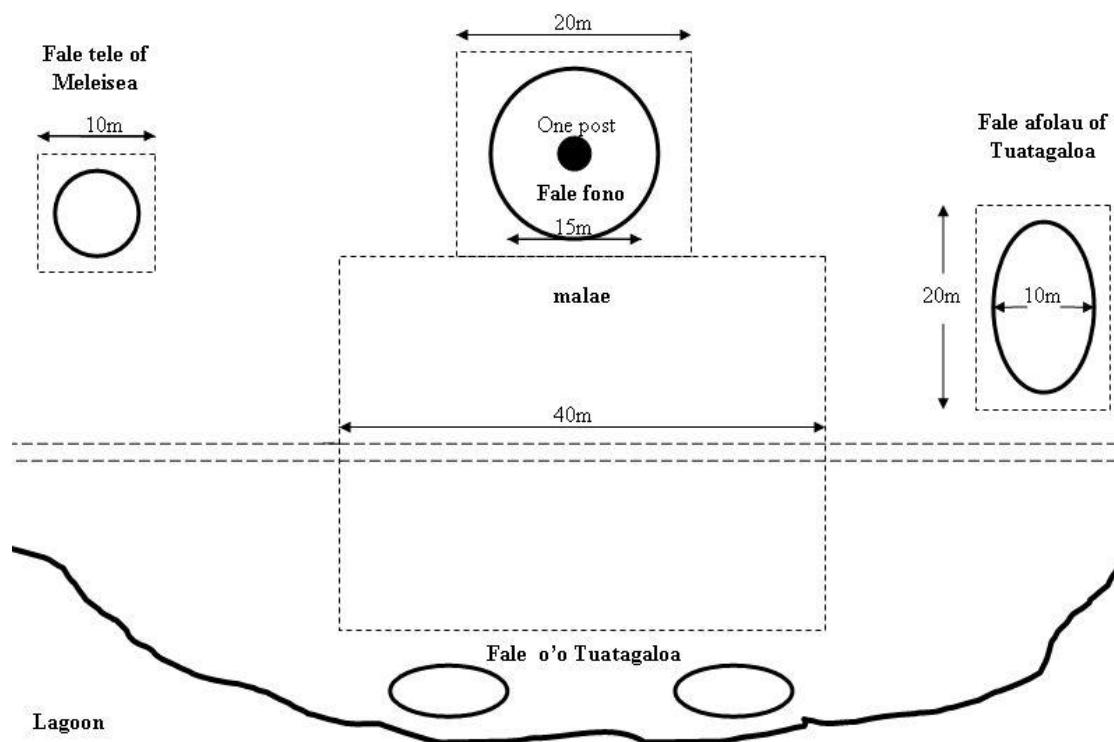


Figure 17: Spatial proportions of the village square in Poutasi in the 1950s (own draft on the basis of descriptions of contemporaries interviewed in 1989)



The proportion of a square is 1:1 because it is equal in length and width, consequently the measure of a square is 1, perfect harmony according to the ancient architectural paradigm. The same applies to the proportion of a circle (1:1) because its radius from the central point to the margin is always the same; consequently the measure of a circle is also 1, perfect harmony. Except for the squares and circles around the village square we perceive rectangles and ovals. Both forms derive from the square and the circle, they take their shape by distorting the original form. In the given cases of the houses of the Tuatagaloa family the rectangles of the basements and the ovals of the ground plans measure 1 in width and 2 in length, i.e. a proportion of 1:2, a harmony which comes next to the perfect measure 1. These proportions of the square are in perfect harmony with the proportions of the buildings in their sectional elevation: the fale tele generally has a proportion of 3:4 and a fale afolau of 1:2.

Mathematical proportions are a formally unassailable method to establish order in the world of forms between uniformity and variety. Applied to music, art and architecture mathematical proportions constitute an essential condition for aesthetics. The architectural and spatial proportions found on and around the village square of Poutasi musically can be expressed as follows: 1:1 (1) is a prime, the perfect unison, 1:2 is an octave, in the hierarchy of proportions coming next to the perfect unison and 3:4 is a fourth, also high up in that very hierarchy.

The message going along with the architecture and spatial structure of the village square and its surrounding buildings could be expressed like this: The perfect and almost perfect proportions tell of a community in harmony, a community in which every family and every individual has its firmly defined place in the social ranking and hierarchy which is most transparently and publicly reflected by the spacings of the settlements in the old village situated at the lagoon. The perfectly proportioned measure of the place may allude to the mythology according to which the two high chief titles directly originate from a son of the supreme god.

Is it legitimate to understand the Samoan architectural and spatial proportions as analogous to European antiquity? Maybe not; but it is food for thought to consider that outside of Europe we find similar geometric forms and proportions in the architectural history of many other parts of the world and hundreds and even thousands of years ago: in Mexico (Maya temples), in Peru (Inca temples), Cambodia (Ankor wat temples) and Indonesia (temple of Borobudur, Java). In all cases the predominant geometric forms are the rectangle and the circle. It is very probable that in all advanced civilizations architecture and space were shaped according to similar proportional measures intended to cause feelings of harmony and well-being in the persons looking at them.

### 3.6 The old village nucleus of Poutasi – a place of social identity

The traditional village square of Poutasi at the lagoon can be read as a spatial text; it is a narrative place reflecting the social structure of the village as it is told in Samoan mythology and laid down in the faalupega. The centre of this narration is dedicated to the public, i.e. to all villagers, to their community. The village square (malae) is the place for special festivities like the welcome of official foreign visitors and the organization of games like cricket matches or dance shows (Fig. 18)



Figure 18: The village square of Poutasi and festivities (own pictures):

- (1) The square in the early 80s with traditional architecture
- (2) The high-chiefs of the village with their orator addressing to a high ranking visitor
- (3) Ladies of the Women's Committee preparing for a the welcome of the visitor
- (4) A group of untitled men presenting the traditional gift for the visitor
- (5) Ladies of the Women's Committee performing a dance

The central building of the square is the fale fono, the village council, public place for the meetings of the social groups of the village: fono matai (meeting of the chiefs, the elected

heads of the families), the meeting of the Women's Committee (comprising all adult female members of the village) and the meeting of the aumaga (meeting of the taulelea, i.e. all untitled men of the village). The central public sphere is flanked by the representative buildings of the two ao alii, the two high chiefs of the village, living in a fale afolau east of the square (long house, Tuatagaloa, first ranking chief), whereas west of the square is the fale tele (round house) of the second ranking chief.

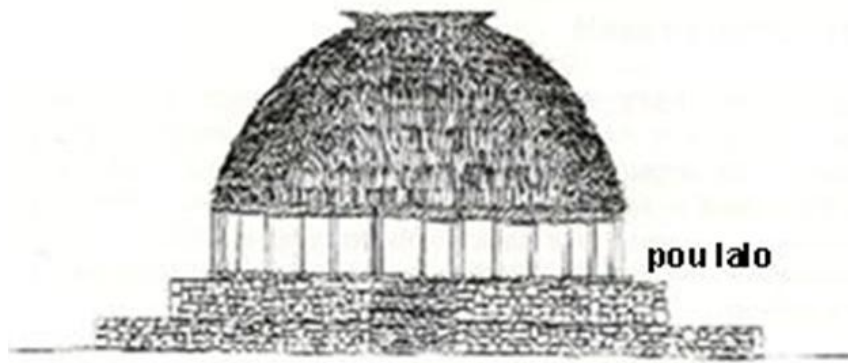
Again next to these buildings and in a very symmetrical order follows another public space: East of the fale afolau of the Tuatagaloa (first ranking) family is the place of the Congregational Church and west of the fale tele of the Meleisea (second ranking) family is the place of the community hall of the Congregational Church and the residence of the congregational minister. To both sides of these buildings, symmetrically located to the west and to the east we find the places of the tulafale (orators) and the places of the usu alii (low ranking chiefs), all kinsmen of the two high chiefs.



Figure 19: malae and fale fono of Poutasi in 2006 (own picture)

The central positions of the traditional village nucleus are taken by the malae and the fale fono (Fig. 19). At first sight the building seems to be identical with all other Samoan fale fono and fale tele. But whereas in all “normal” fale tele everywhere in Samoa the roof construction is based on the wall posts (Fig. 20.1, pou lalo), in the Poutasi fale fono this function is taken over by the central post (Fig. 20.2, pou tuloto).





**Figure 20.1**



**Figure 20.2**

Figure 20: fale tele based on lateral posts (20.1) and on a central post (20.2)  
(source: UNESCO 1992: 77)

This special construction of the central post is crucial to set the final point in understanding the spatial narration of the old village of Poutasi. Seen from the bird's eye perspective the central post appears as a point, i.e. a geometric form already mentioned in the excursus but not taken up until now. The point may be defined as one element, if not the constitutive one, of geometry. Pythagoras defined the point as a unit which has a position and Euklid describes the point as something which does not have parts, i.e. something which is not divisible, an axiom. In any case the point is a concept which is decisive in the sense that it is constitutive for other axioms: The first axiom of Hilbert's system is: two non-identical points (P and Q) determine a straight line (Hilbert/ Bernays 1934)).

In the case of Poutasi the most prominent geometric form of a point is located in the centre of the fale fono; it is this point upon which everything of the building (the most prominent building of the village) is based on. In the architecture of the building the roof is based on one post only; seen in the bird's eye view the post is nothing but a point. With the help of a set of different beams and rafters this one post carries the whole construction of the roof; the lateral pillars have a more or less decorative and assisting role (Fig. 21).



Figure 21: fale fono Poutasi: “one post” (own picture)

The central post of the fale fono thus is the point, the central pillar which makes the place *unique* and *unmistakable*. The theoretical concept of identity in a social context is defined as being such as *all* others, but with regard to the individual context identity means to be such as *no* other. Poutasi viewed from a sociological and architectural perspective appears to be as all other Samoan villages because it has the same social and architectural features, but there are a few details in its social order and its architectural structure in the context of the village square that make it unique and unmistakable among all other Samoan villages. The nucleus of the old village of Poutasi tells of the local identity of Poutasi and its people.

#### **4. Towards a Conclusion**

After the destructive effect of the tsunami and the reconstruction of the major part of the houses further inland at the road the village has not only lost its central public square but at the same time that ensemble of atmospheric quality and symbolic effects of the place which made the village unique and unmistakable. The fale fono with the one central post withstood the tsunami but the malae, the public square in front of it, now appears to be an empty and almost dead place because it is no bustling with village people. Life now has shifted to the

main road. Up to now the majority of the village people are not aware of the social implications of this recent spatial development, but if there is no revival of the traditional village nucleus the consequence of this will be that an important part of the Samoan spatial archives definitely threatens to be lost.

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